



BERNARD KHOURY

His intricate designs on socially sensitive sites in Lebanon have added a dimension of program and life to what once was forgotten. Bernard Khoury may be one of the very few architects in the region whose view and design process creates a refreshing dialogue. One that is between old and new, what our eyes are accustomed to and what blows our minds away.

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KHOURY Photo by Jon Shard*

How did you find Harvard? It seems like such a conservative school but your work is anything but.

“Let me put it this way - I don't think Harvard changed my life. I did have a good time there I must say. It's not the school as much as the people you are with. I think the problem is, and that is with all architecture schools, is that they are too self centered. And that is problematic.”

B018

While his introduction to the architectural practice may have been a rocky one, we think his first project compensates for the wait and struggle. The first space he designed, B018, broke all construction rules. Contractors refused to build it because they simply hadn't seen anything like it before, and that worked to his advantage at the end. An unlikely collaboration between an architect and a garbage company created a space that is immensely unpredictable.

“B018 is a complicated story. It was built on a former refugee camp in the quarantine. It was a refugee camp for Armenians in 1920s and Palestinians in 1948 and on up until 1976 when Beirut was divided into two sectors. The Christian militias whipped out the camp in a few days it was ugly story - we don't talk about the ugly stories of the war.”



1. B018 awake – roof panel reflect interior life
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 Photo by Jon Shard

Khoury adds, "It's a building that sleeps during the day and wakes up at night. The building expands into the parking when it's awake. When it sleeps during the day it is completely invisible. It's about preserving the void in the quarantine. I think the most important thing about this building is that it injected life in an area that was totally doomed."

You mentioned a number of times that you think Beirut is in a denial period – what period is it in now?

"I would like to clarify what I mean by denial. The buildings that are coming up are not a reaction or related to the context. There is an evident difference between the complexity of society and the buildings we build. After 1990 we went through a long denial period that we are still in and this is extremely dangerous. And you will

see a lot of criticism of that through my work. It's as if the war started 1975-1990 and we can put it between brackets and we can go back to what was - a dangerous post card that I don't buy."

Beirut wanted to erase part of its architectural history because of the war – What are the driving forces behind other M.E cities?

"History is a problematic question. The region has a serious problem in formulating its own history. Let's start with Beirut as it's my playground, in the post war early 1990's. I think rich architecture history stops with the French mandate. I am not criticizing this – history stops at a specific time. Local architects for generations built beautiful modern buildings. Beirut was a very modern city that had at the time modernity that happened from



within. Beirut was open to modernity, open to creating its own modernity through the process of building a nation. And for 30 years, most institutional buildings were designed by modern local architects. This is evident in Iraq, Egypt, Kuwait and a number of Gulf States. Unfortunately this part of history is not considered legitimate. Our history is sugar coated, very Orientalist, history as the West likes to perceive it. After the 60's you can't produce modernity anymore you have to import it!"

Do you embrace the ruins in your work because you feel attached to the history, or is your work a reaction to the redevelopment of Beirut's city center?

"I don't fetishize the ruins. Centrale for example was a reaction to that specific context."

CENTRALE

Tell us about Centrale.

“Centrale is a restaurant that was built in an old abandoned house since 1975 because of its proximity to the demarcation line. The owner wanted a big hole, which is impossible to do because of the load bearing walls with very small rooms. So if you touch one wall the whole building would crumble. How you keep the skin up as you remove the guts out of the body? Imagine I take your body and I put steel belts around your skin to keep it in tension and then I gut it out and then I put somebody else’s – a more solid a more dynamic body inside and then when I’m done I remove the belts and then I do a little plastic surgery a more stretching of your skin to what you supposedly looked like and then I put some blush and some colors they love to put on those buildings and then I said no stop - we are not going to rehabilitate we are going to express the process of what we have done the gutting out the very strange and violent thing. We kept the belts to accentuate the process of decaying and this process of preserving or playing on the poetry of its decay. We put a grid and wire mesh all over the old skin (the lime stone). And you can see traces of the violence that hit the building. This is history to me not the stupid rehabilitation that everybody was doing next door. This is history it’s very violent very awkward and very long story but this is history.”

All your projects are poetic and site specific – do you have a space in mind that you would like to invade next?

“I don’t have a specific site in mind right at this very moment. I like to look at the situations and the best situations are not the ones you expect. We tend to work in acrobatic situations where we are challenged by the site, and as a result the buildings are a reaction to the context.”

What un-built project would you love to see completed?

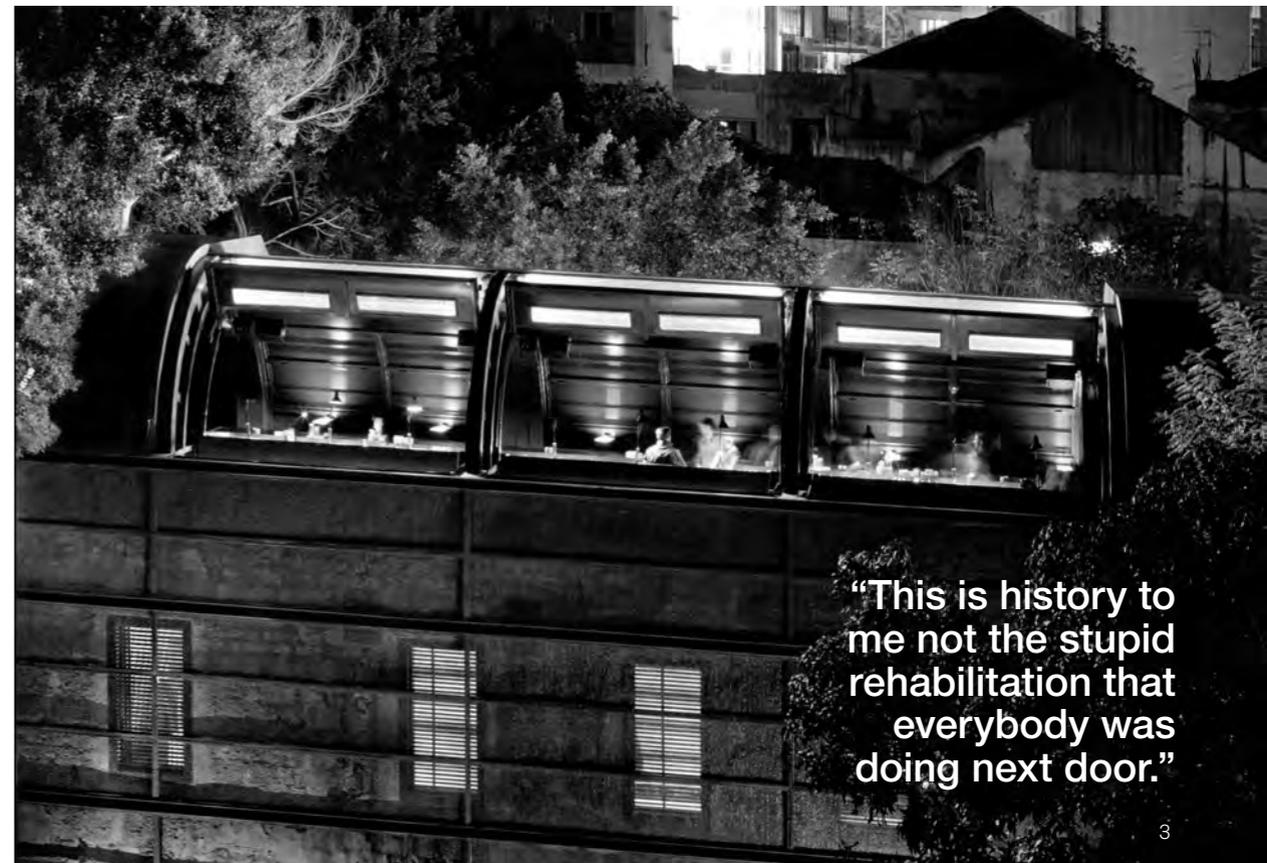
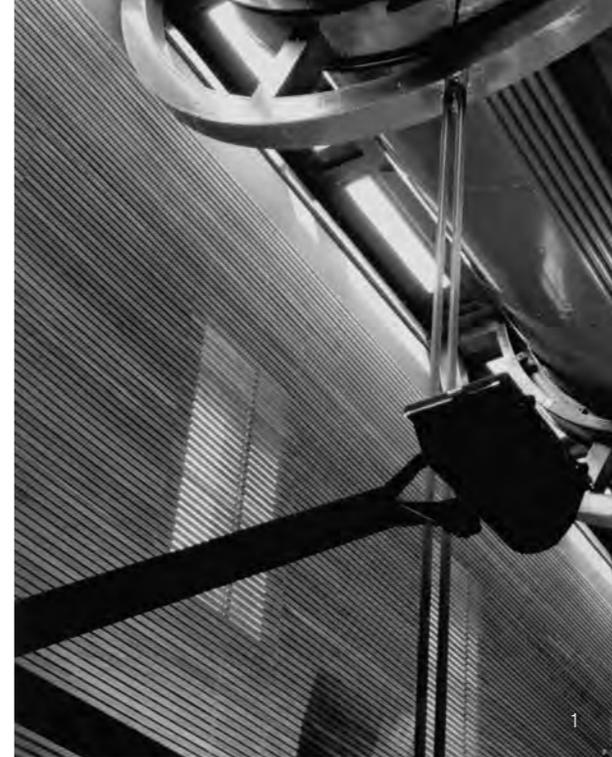
“All of them! (Laughs) If you look into our archive we have around 150 proposals out of which 15 are completed and a few currently under construction. The rate of what we build is slow, its part of the structure of the profession.”

What’s next for DW15? Where do you think the future of architecture is heading and where do you think it should be heading?

“(Laughs) The future will take care of itself. Stretching that far is not possible. I am obsessed with the present, its central in my work. We are no longer in a situation to project manifestos. We are still stuck in concrete, glass and steel. It’s the fault of our profession really – an archaic profession to maneuver. We live in a culture that is more dynamic than our profession. The things we are handling are volatile and static.”

“We might be building something in Dubai soon – still under talks but will let you know.”

We can’t wait to have a shrine to visit!



“This is history to me not the stupid rehabilitation that everybody was doing next door.”

1. Interior skin and suspended bar space
2. Exterior wire mesh – exposed war torn skin
3. Convertible roof structure

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